

# Acton 2020 Burning Issues for Consideration

## RESIDENTIAL DEVELOPMENT

### 1) Housing:

- a. Is more housing development desirable? If so, what kind and where?
- b. What is the effect of new housing (market and affordable) on schools, town facilities and services, traffic, and tax rate.
- c. How do we reconcile new housing development on currently open parcels or farmland with the goals of preserving open space, protecting our remaining farms, and preserving/enhancing town character? (one example might be farmland on Upper Prospect near Ace Hardware which is currently part of high density overlay district (not sure I have the right term?))
- e. What are possible measures to consider which could encourage or discourage certain housing types or impose higher design review standards?

### 2) Housing that is affordable versus 'affordable housing'

The state defines 'affordable housing' in one way, and households deciding if they can afford to live in Acton define it a different way.

- a. How should the town view its various housing obligations: legal ones to the state, moral ones to the people of Acton, and a self-interested view of what mix of housing will create the diversity of residents that would make the town a more workable and interesting and varied place to live?
- b. Can/should the Town agree on a formal affordable housing plan that would allow us to limit 40B developments to the areas that work best for the town?
- c. What would it take to make existing housing affordable, by the state's definition, rather than building a lot of new housing? This question can be considered in terms of legal technicalities as well as in terms of having these homes be in good condition and well located such that the cost to maintain them, pay for utilities, commute to work, etc. is affordable, too.

### 3) Testing the Value of Density as a planning tool

A lot of recent literature about suburban planning seems to be about the ecological and other negative consequences of sprawl (low density housing chewing up open space), and the value of density (concentrations of people and activity approaching urban levels allows for more human interaction, and less use of energy and land and cars). What can we do to change the economic incentives and regulatory requirements so that developers are motivated to do in-fill development and not sprawl development in Acton?

#### a. Density vs Sprawl in primarily residential areas

One zoning tool Acton has used to encourage preservation of open space while still creating residential developments is cluster zoning (single family homes) and Planned Conservation Residential Communities (PCRC, which allows up to four dwelling units/building). Has that been successful? [from von Hoffman, Wrestling with Growth in Acton, Massachusetts (Jan 2010), “many opponents of growth in Acton dislike the law because they feel that it increases the

number of allowable dwellings by allowing developers to count wetlands, on which wetland restricts prohibit development, in calculating their land-to-housing unit ratios.” p. 20-21]

- b. Density to promote commercial and community vitality within and near villages  
Many of our planning ideas are about how to concentrate new development in to the existing centers. What really makes that transition work? When is in-fill development a good idea and what can we do to encourage in-fill development. When is in-fill development a bad idea because it fundamentally changes patterns of development and land use that contribute to our perception of town character?

## **WATER**

- 1). Water Quality:
  - a. Impact on groundwater from existing and new development, particularly in areas of high soil transmissivity (the “wishbone”)
  - b. Does protection of our water quality require extension of the sewer system and/or limits to development? More inspection/regulation?
- 2). Water Quantity/Source

## **LAND USE/LOCATION OF DEVELOPMENT:**

- 1) Understanding the potential impact of current zoning
  - a. on developable parcels adjacent to or within existing villages? Consider village character, neighborhood character, design guidelines, mixed use development.
  - b. on developable parcels in large outlying areas?
- 2) Open Space:
  - a. What are our priorities for acquisition; policies/approaches other than acquisition?
  - b. What are our policies with respect to preservation of agricultural land and uses?
  - c. When is open space purchase not worth pursuing? How do we measure the value of any given parcel?
  - d. Let’s make sure we understand and publicize the detailed pros & cons of all the different ways to protect land, including the ways that don’t involve out-right purchase.
- 3) Commercial development:  
Effect on tax base and availability of gathering places and village vitality.  
Implications: whether, where, what kind, and how to encourage it
- 4) Recreation Fields vs. Agriculture vs. Trees.  
We face this now at Morrison Farm, we will face it again with the Caouette land in a few years, and it's an issue for any flat relatively dry land the town may acquire. With the new OSRP and the Acton 2020 plan being developed at the same time, we have a chance to see if expertise + facts + dialog can uncover any particular or general guidelines for the town to use going forward. Do we need more playing fields? What is the value of sustaining local agriculture? What about just letting trees grow - isn't it cheap and trees sequesters carbon? We may not achieve a single answer, but it would be

worthwhile to lay out the analysis in a public place so it can be a part of any future detailed decision-making.

## **PUBLIC FACILITIES/INFRASTRUCTURE**

- 1) Need for new senior and/or community center
  - a. What do we need to research or understand to start sorting out what sort of facility will hit the sweet spot of providing enough value to the town and its residents in terms of our goals that it's worth travelling down the path of a major new municipal building?
  - b. How do we pay for it?
- 2) Need for new fire station in North Acton
  - a. Do we need a new one in North Acton in light of continued housing growth on 2A, especially Avalon?
  - b. Implications: budget impact, effect on response times, use of newly available space if a new station is built, shared agreements with neighboring town an option?
- 3) Public Transportation
  - a. Train station and parking
  - b. Bus/van/etc - public acceptability and ridership frequency necessary to support these modes, measure to promote them
- 4) Sidewalks and Bicycle travel paths (on road and off road)  
Implications: sidewalk improvements, off-road path opportunities; on-road bicycle improvements (signage, wider shoulder, bike lanes); priority links/locations
- 5) Traffic
  - a. What is it that really rankles people about the life of cars in Acton, and can we do anything about it? Are traffic issues more about safety and predictability about getting things done and less about the speed of getting from one place to another?
  - b. What's been done in other communities, and what, if anything, has worked? Is there data about whether encouraging alternate transport can ever get us to the point of fewer cars on the road: what's the experience elsewhere?

## **TOWN CHARACTER**

- 1) Historic Resources: are specific measures needed to conserve them?  
Implications: demolition delay bylaw, zoning to limit size of housing; programs to invest in maintenance and rehab. of historic homes/buildings.
- 2) Villages
  - a. Build on Phase I input identifying desirable features of a "village"
  - b. What is a 21<sup>st</sup> century village? Is "village" the right word?
  - c. How do each of Acton's existing and potential centers differ and how can their separate and distinct characters be preserved, promoted and enhanced?
  - d. How can we encourage density, infill development *and* protect the character of our neighborhoods?

- e. If sewers are important to protect our water and insure Acton's long-term sustainability (let's figure out if this is true!), how can we insure that the development which sewers will make feasible is consistent with our goals to preserve town character?
- 3) How do we translate goals which are aesthetically based into bylaws, guidelines, and other decision-making processes that will support those goals?

## **SCHOOLS**

- 1) Schools: in absence of new evidence, no major facility needs anticipated except eventual replacement of the oldest elementary schools and some repairs and improvements to existing facilities.
- 2) Population Shift vs Perceived School Quality  
It seems that as long as Acton is perceived to be one of the top school systems in Eastern MA, we will attract more than our share of families with kids. Along that path, there is increased population pressure leading to increased traffic and pressures on open space, an increased demand for housing keeping housing prices high, more kids per household leading to higher taxes, and a cycle of narrowing of our population to well off families with kids. Is there another path, where there is more economic and demographic diversity, people living in Acton for longer periods of time through all life stages, and more to draw people to Acton than the schools? And if that alternate path is desirable, what can we do to steer things in that direction?

## **SUSTAINABILITY**

- 1) Sustainability: how to define it in terms of carbon footprint, energy use, town character, natural resources, and financial viability of town services.  
Implications: programs to encourage home and town-owned facilities energy conservation; also above issues on transportation, open space, and location of development.
- 2) How deep is the commitment to sustainability?  
I've just proposed rewriting the sustainability goal in a way that lays out a path toward sustainability much more explicitly. Does some version of that fit with a compelling majority of the involved citizens of Acton? I think we need to get more in to the detailed discussion of what travelling toward sustainability might mean for Acton, and get more people involved in that discussion, before we can know how definite and direct our objectives can be.

## **DIVERSITY**

- 1) Growing minority population--how can we integrate them better?
- 2) Is the sizable minority population in our schools with their different cultural values on academics upping the pressure for all kids?
- 3) Do we have adequate language translation services in our town government, forms, etc.?

## **KEY TRADEOFFS**

- 1) More/better facilities/services vs tax rate impact
- 2) Types of new housing vs. school and tax impacts and effects on town character
- 3) More commercial development vs. effects on town character

- 4) Conservation of groundwater quality vs regulation and cost to owners
- 5) Loss of open land vs. more development in and around villages
- 6) Cost-Justifying the big ticket items: Open Space / a new Community Center / North Acton Fire Station
- 7) How much/what quality of services should the town offer? How much is the community willing to pay?